Planning language use in bilingual families

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Introduction

Why consider a plan for language use in a bilingual family?

Choosing which language to use in a bilingual family is not an easy matter, and in fact, too often a conscious, informed decision is never really made at all. Families can drift into the habit of using a particular language without really realising it, sometimes with very unfortunate consequences for family relationships or for the language community down the track. Our aim in this book is to provide some background to the decisions families make about what language to use at home and outside. We aim to provide information for Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)^1 teachers and counsellors so they are able to provide informed advice to AMEP clients who want to raise their children bilingually, while they are also developing their own English skills.

Using this book

General information on learning and using language

General information on learning and using language is provided throughout. This serves as background to understanding the issues that come into play when families are deciding what languages they will use and why. Throughout the book we complement this information with examples from real-life experiences of migrants who have studied English through the AMEP. These examples come from interview and observational data collected in successive phases of a longitudinal research project funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, and conducted by the AMEP Research Centre and Macquarie University respectively: Phase 1, from 2008-2009, Language Training and Settlement

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^1 The Adult Migrant English Program is a national on-arrival program funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship that offers classes to newly arrived migrants to Australia who do not have basic functional English.
Success: Are they related? (see Yates, 2010) and Phase 2, from 2011-2014, AMEP Longitudinal Study.

**Reflection points**

Reflection points are provided throughout Chapters 2 to 5. These can be used for personal reflection while reading the book, or group discussion as part of a professional development session.

**Chapter summaries**

At the beginning of each chapter we provide a summary and indicate the key issues for AMEP teachers and counsellors to consider while reading the chapter.

- **Chapter 1** provides general information about language learning and bilingualism.

- **Chapter 2** explores bilingual families, how they vary and the factors that influence their decisions about when and where to use the languages they speak.

- **Chapter 3** looks at ways AMEP clients can focus on their own English while they are also raising their children bilingually.

- **Chapter 4** presents some common approaches AMEP clients might take if they wanted to maintain a family language alongside English and thus raise their children bilingually.

- **Chapter 5** explores some of the strategies AMEP clients might use to increase the relevance of the family language to their children and encourage them to use it more often and in more situations.

- **Chapter 6** provides a summary of the information presented in Chapters 1 – 5 in the form of answers to frequently asked questions about raising children bilingually. The questions are presented in both expanded form and in the form of a chart for quick reference. We also include common questions that teachers, counsellors or AMEP clients might have and provide background information for the discussions that might arise from the stories presented in Chapters 7 and 8.
• **Chapters 7 and 8** feature stories that come from accounts given to us by the participants in both phases of the longitudinal study mentioned above. In **Chapter 7** we present stories in a little more detail in order to provide those who are teaching or working with AMEP clients with some background to the issues in the volume. They are designed to raise awareness of some of the issues AMEP clients might face as they raise their children bilingually and also learn English themselves, and can be used as a basis for reflection and discussion in professional development sessions. In **Chapter 8** we present the same stories in a format that teachers can use for direct teaching with clients in the classroom.

• **Chapter 9** suggests resources that can help professionals and AMEP clients and their families to find out further information on how to raise their children bilingually and attend to their own English development needs at the same time.
Chapter 1

Knowing, learning and using more than one language

In this chapter we look at what is meant by a language, what it means to know a language and how a language is learned. We then look at the benefits of bilingualism and at the potential benefits for AMEP clients and their children of maintaining family languages alongside English as they settle in Australia.

The key issues covered:

- There are many benefits of maintaining family languages alongside English.

- Being able to communicate in a common language is good for family relationships. If children do not speak their parents’ language and become more proficient in English than they are, communication across generations may become difficult because they will have no common language.

- Language and cultural connections can be maintained across generations when children are able to speak the language of their grandparents or aunties and uncles.

- Children raised bilingually are at an advantage. They are inclined to be socially more open-minded, find it easier to learn new languages, and tend to be more talented readers. Knowing more than one language can also open up many different job opportunities later in life.
What is bilingualism?

While the term bilingualism technically means speaking two languages, it is often used interchangeably with the term multilingualism (the ability to use many languages). The majority of the world’s population is, in fact, at least bilingual. For many people, it is quite normal to speak one or more languages at home, another with their neighbours and a third at school or work. Travel to another part of the country, or even the province, might require the ability to speak a fourth. In China, for example, although Mandarin is the official language, many speak another language variety at home that is very different. Similarly, although Bahasa Indonesia is the official language of Indonesia, the population of 240 million speak over 700 different languages, and children growing up in Bali, for example, may grow up speaking Balinese at home and only learn Indonesian when they go to school. It is also common for people from many African countries to speak a number of different languages, as is the case for Samba:

*Samba is from Guinea and English is his sixth language. He speaks his mother’s language (Fulani) and his father’s languages (Maninka and Kakabe), as well as Susu which is the common language used by many people in his part of Guinea. He also speaks French, which is the official language of Guinea.*

What is a language?

Issues around what counts as a language often provoke passionate debate and disagreement because the answer to this question is as much social as it is linguistic. To address the issue of what a language actually is, we first need to introduce the notions of variety and dialect.

**Variety**

Variety is the term that sociolinguists use to refer to a version of a language that is spoken by a particular group. For example, in Australia we speak a variety of English, and in the U.S.
and the U.K. they speak other varieties that differ in some respects. Within Australia people may also speak different varieties of Australian English, according to how their friends and family speak, what kind of school they went to and the situation they are in. The same person is likely to speak differently if they are out fishing with their mates at the weekend or arguing a case in a court of law; that is, they use different varieties of the same language. So, variety is a neutral term that we can use to refer to a version of a language that we speak at different times or in different places or with different people.

**Dialect**

A dialect is a variety that is spoken in a particular region. Dialects can vary in how closely they resemble each other and the standard language. The type of English that is heard in tenement blocks in Glasgow is an example of a dialect that is so different from Australian English that TV footage from that part of the world is often shown with subtitles. Dialects of the same language may have different words and grammar, and they also differ in the way words are pronounced; that is, a dialect is usually associated with a particular accent. Generally the differences between dialects of English in Australia are only slight, but in other parts of the world they can be much more dramatic so that speakers of different dialects can have trouble understanding each other.

**Language**

A humorous definition that is not too far from the truth is that a language is a ‘dialect with an army’. In other words, it is very difficult to define a language linguistically, because it is people who get to define what is and what is not a language, and they often make these decisions based on social and political factors rather than linguistic ones. Dialects have historically wandered in and out of language status according to the politics and passions of the day. Indeed, in some parts of the world we find that there are very few major structural differences between related dialects that are referred to as separate languages, while in others, dialects that are very different are brought under the umbrella of one language. The linguistic differences between several of the so-called languages in the Balkans, for example, are not so very great and certainly much less noticeable than the differences that can be found between the so-called dialects of Chinese. So a dialect tends to be regarded as a
language if there are strong social, political or economic reasons for doing so. A shared language can be a strong unifying force in a nation state. By the same token, it is easier to exclude or critique people who do not share your language. In this volume, we use the term language to refer to any dialect that AMEP clients share and wish to speak, whether or not it happens to be a national language or has any kind of official status.

What does it mean to ‘know’ a language?

Bilingualism and multilingualism

As teachers and professionals working with bilinguals, we know that there are many different levels of proficiency in a language—from knowing only a few words to complete fluency. The term bilingual or multilingual can be used to refer to anyone who speaks more than one language with some level of proficiency. This means that all AMEP clients are at least bilingual since they all speak the language they grew up with and are also learning English as an additional language. Many also have varying levels of proficiency in a range of languages that were spoken in their home towns or in the places they passed through on their way to Australia. In this volume, we will use the term bilingual to refer to some level of proficiency in two or more languages.

Balanced bilingualism

While some bilinguals are balanced bilinguals, that is, they have equal capabilities in each language, some bilinguals have different areas of proficiency in each of their languages and one language may be dominant over the other. Many migrants to Australia, for example, have been educated in an official language that is different from their mother tongue. In the example given above, Samba speaks several of the many languages spoken in Guinea, but he was educated only in French. This means that he may feel more comfortable speaking French in professional and bureaucratic interactions but he may be more comfortable using another language in informal or family situations.

For instance, when emotions run high, Tomoko finds it easier to express her feelings in Japanese than in English:
Tomoko is a Japanese speaker married to an Australian who can speak some Japanese. She finds that it is harder to express her feelings in English when she is feeling emotional. When she is upset with her husband she uses Japanese even though he can’t always understand what she is saying!

Domains

We say that bilinguals tend to use different languages for different domains. Children born to Turkish-speaking parents in Australia for example, may feel more comfortable communicating in English about the things they learn at school, but more comfortable using Turkish at home. They are therefore bilingual in both English and Turkish and native speakers of both, but their language skills are domain-specific.

Active and passive language

In addition to feeling more comfortable using different languages in different domains, we can also know languages in slightly different ways. It is possible to know how to speak a language actively, that is, we can have the ability to initiate and participate in conversations or write reports in that language; or we may have a knowledge that is more passive in that we may be able to understand it but not speak or write it. These skills can be specific to particular domains, so that someone may be able to speak a language actively and fluently in casual conversation with neighbours, but not in other domains such as at the doctors; others may be able to read a letter from an insurance company but may have difficulty writing one or filling out a claim form.

Migrants who have studied English in very traditional ways before coming to Australia may have vast reserves of passive knowledge and be able to read quite complicated texts but be unable to hold a casual conversation. Li Li Lin, for example, taught herself how to read English specifically for her work, but she never heard it spoken:
Li Li Lin worked in a chemical factory in China during the Cultural Revolution. She needed to read research articles about chemistry, and taught herself how to read English so she could read scientific journal articles and books written in English. However, despite her advanced reading skills, when she arrived in Australia, Li Li Lin sometimes had trouble understanding the local weather forecast when listening to the radio.

Some migrants may have the skills to write quite eloquently about poetry but do not have a clue how to draft an email, while others may have learned to converse quite fluently and be able to chat for hours, but have never learned to read or write. Full competence in a language entails acquiring both active and passive skills and the ability to use them in a range of domains, but while this may be the goal for some people, others may have different objectives.

**Native speakers**

Although it is quite common to talk about someone’s first language (L1) and to refer to them as a native speaker of that language, it is not entirely straightforward to decide who is a native speaker of a language and who is not. People who have lived in different countries or grown up in multilingual families or environments may speak several languages in which they have different levels of proficiency in different domains.

**How do we learn a language?**

**Everyone is different**

People across the world learn languages in very different circumstances and in a huge variety of ways. Most people have little conscious understanding of how they learned their first language, but learning languages later in life for academic, social or economic reasons is usually much more difficult and often requires expert guidance by a teacher. People seem to have different preferences and styles when it comes to language learning. Some like to start trying to speak actively from the very beginning, while others prefer to hold back and spend a long time listening before they say anything.
Different language learning styles are not only evident in adult classrooms. Young children also vary considerably in how they learn languages. Some start to speak before they are one year old using single words and then slowly build up until they start to put two or three words together, so that their utterances gradually become longer. Others spend much longer listening and say very little at all until they are much older and then they suddenly start to speak using relatively complex strings of words. Children who are learning more than one language also vary in how they start to speak. Some might be early talkers, while others might say their first words later than children who grow up with only one language. Some might develop two different languages simultaneously and have similar sized vocabularies in each language. Others might know many words in one language and only a small number in another. It is also quite common for children who learn a second language after their first has been established to go through a ‘silent period’ in which they listen but don’t talk for a while—but once again children can differ greatly with regard to how they might react in this situation.

The impact of age

Generally, the younger we are when we learn a language the better. Although many factors impact on exactly which is the best age to learn a language, it is nevertheless true that many children are able to pick up aspects of a language more easily or quickly than adults, and are likely to become fluent speakers of English before their parents. This is not just because of the structure of their brains, but also because the world is simpler for children. They are not faced with the same responsibilities or demands on their time as their parents; the worlds they live in and therefore things they want to speak about are generally less complex, and they are often less self-conscious about trying things out in a new language. If they go to school or pre-school, they are often surrounded by English and called upon to engage with their peers and form friendships through English in a way that does not often happen to their parents. Of course, they are also acquiring knowledge alongside language. Their parents, however, have already amassed a store of knowledge through the medium of the other languages that they speak, so for them, the process of learning English also means mapping concepts across from their native or early-learned languages.
Starting school with little English

AMEP clients might worry about their children coping at kindergarten or school if they haven’t yet learned English. However, they need not worry, for although it might be difficult at first, most children who start kindergarten or school not knowing any English don’t suffer any long-term academic consequences. The younger the children are when they enter an English-speaking environment, the quicker the transition will be for them, but even older children usually adapt relatively swiftly, as Jeannie’s son did:

Jeannie is from China and moved to Australia with her 9 year old son to live with her husband (a French migrant who had lived in Australia for many years). At first they didn’t want to sign the son up for swimming classes or piano lessons because they were worried he wouldn’t be able to understand the teachers. After only one year in Australia his English had improved so much that he could start his lessons.

Use it or lose it

Just as languages can be learned, they can also be lost over the course of a lifetime and the old adage of ‘use it or lose it’ is very relevant to language learning. Young children seem to find it easy both to learn to use a language when they need it, but then also to forget it if it is no longer required. So if they are immersed in English at school and their parents do not consciously make efforts to use their first language at home, the children may gradually ‘lose it’, and with it a very rich connection to their family’s cultural heritage. If a parent decides to speak only English to their child then this can reduce the need for them to speak their first language so that they will begin to lose it. Jeannie’s son, mentioned above, became proficient in English very quickly once he arrived in Australia. However, his Mandarin suffered as a result:

When Jeannie first arrived from China with her 9 year old son, she made the decision to speak only English with him because English is Australia’s language. However, now that he is 14 years old, his Mandarin is not as strong as it was and Jeannie was shocked that he was unable to understand Mandarin when they recently visited Beijing for a holiday.
If their efforts to learn and use English have been very successful, adults, too, can begin to lose their L1 after migration if they do not take steps to actively retain it. Emma, for example found her Portuguese became weaker as her English became stronger:

*Emma is from Brazil and has been in Australia for just over 5 years. Her husband is Swedish and speaks Portuguese and English in addition to Swedish. They used to speak Portuguese with each other, but once her English improved they swapped to English. She now feels that her Portuguese is getting worse. She doesn’t really write in Portuguese anymore, and even uses English with a friend from Brazil because it is easier for both of them to communicate in English.*

**Switching languages**

It is very common for bilinguals who share the same languages to code-switch, that is, to change from one language or dialect to another, sometimes in the middle of what they are saying. Code-switching is, in fact, a natural part of bilingualism and certainly does not mean that the speaker is not proficient in either language. On the contrary, code-switching can be a very sophisticated affair and often follows regular patterns. They might switch between languages, for example, because one of the languages has a more appropriate word for what they are trying to say. Speakers can also signal extra layers of meaning through the change in language. If, for example, a speaker recognises that the person they are talking to comes from the same part of the world as they do, they may switch from English to a language that they share. On the other hand, speakers can signal that they disapprove of something that has been said by switching out of their shared L1 into a more formal language, such as the one they learned at school. A switch of language in this way can convey closeness or distance, approval or irritation and so on.

**Different codes for different domains**

In bilingual homes, code-switching may occur if different languages are used for different purposes and in different domains. For example, in a family where children are attending school in Australia, their school-related vocabulary might be in English, even when the family is speaking a different language in the home. However, although bilingual children
might switch or mix the two languages when speaking with their parents, they seem to know not to do so when they are speaking with monolingual English speakers. They are able to choose which language to speak on the basis of who they are talking to. Li Ming’s daughter, for example, had no trouble choosing which language to speak when a monolingual English-speaking researcher visited their home:

*When the researcher rang the doorbell, Li Ming’s 11 year old daughter answered the door. She spoke to the researcher in English (with an Australian accent) and then to her mother in Mandarin. Throughout the visit she chose which language to use on the basis of who she was speaking with.*

**Why raise children bilingually?**

There are many reasons why families may choose to bring up their children with more than one language. In the case of migrants, it is often because they want their children to speak their own L1 or that of other relatives to make sure that they can develop and retain a connection with their extended family and with the culture they came from.

**Family relationships**

Relationships within the nuclear and with the extended family can be damaged if family members do not share a language in which they can communicate freely. As noted above, children often learn English more quickly than their parents, particularly if they are busy working and may have postponed their English language classes in favour of earning a living to provide for their family. They may find themselves in workplaces that are not conducive to learning English, perhaps because it is noisy, the work is communicatively undemanding or because they work with members of their own L1 community.

If the children are learning English rapidly at school and at the same time seeing their parents less frequently, the language gap in the family can widen until eventually children only feel comfortable speaking English and may forget or fail to learn the first language of their parents. The parents, on the other hand, may be working so hard that they have little opportunity to develop their English so that they only feel comfortable speaking in their L1. This divide can be disastrous for families who then find that they have no common language
in which they can really communicate. For families already coping with the demands of trying to reconcile the family and cultural values they have brought with them with those they find in Australia, a linguistic divide along generational lines is not helpful. Add to this the particular challenges of adolescence, and there can be serious consequences for family harmony.

AMEP clients are usually near the beginning of their journey into English language learning and settlement in Australia, and so the long-term consequences of the family language choices they make may not always be obvious. If we all had a crystal ball, life would be so much easier! We have met some clients, though, who seemed to be at risk of finding themselves isolated at home without a language to share with their children, like Rhonda, a 31 year old female from Lebanon:

Rhonda’s husband has lived in Australia for 30 years and has been married previously. She has three step-children who do not live with them full-time but who come to stay with them at weekends. Her husband and his children all speak English well and while her husband speaks Arabic with her, the children only have limited understanding of Arabic and speak English all the time. Although this English-speaking environment should be supportive for Rhonda, she finds that it has the opposite impact on her English language development. Early in the study she reported feeling that she was not learning any more English and she was not improving. Six months later she explained that she could not understand what the children were saying when they speak English to each other, and they did not try to speak more slowly for her benefit or try to explain things for her.

Family and cultural connections

Being able to speak the language of the grandparents or aunties and uncles is also important for the preservation of language and cultural connections between the generations. Members of an extended family might be geographically dispersed and live in different countries. If the children all learn different languages and lose their home language, it can be difficult for them to communicate effectively with relatives, and this can result in a loss of family cohesion. The importance of these family and cultural connections are reflected in Nfumu’s plans for the future:
Nfumu is from the Democratic Republic of Congo and although he has advanced English, he speaks mainly French and Tshiluba at home in Australia with his parents and brother. The home is the only place where he can still speak Tshiluba. When he has children of his own he would like them to speak Tshiluba so they can speak the language of his immediate and extended family and might one day be able to go to his village in Congo to meet and speak with members of his family there. He would also like them to be able to speak French and English. He feels that Tshiluba will connect them to the family back home and English and French will connect them with the rest of the world.

Social, cognitive and economic benefits

In addition to providing the opportunity for children to develop connections with their family and L1 community, research also suggests a range of other social, cognitive and economic benefits.

• **Greater openness**

  Bilingual children have increased opportunity to experience and understand more than one culture, and research suggests that they may be socially more open-minded as a result, and may understand earlier than monolingual children that different people might have different opinions and beliefs.

• **Advantages learning languages**

  Bilingualism can confer a range of linguistic advantages. Bilingual children seem to have advantages over monolinguals when it comes to noticing how language works. It seems that knowing two different language systems makes it easier for them to notice the structure of a language, attend to its features, and understand how these relate to meaning. They also find it easier to identify and recognise the sounds of a language, and this advantage starts from the very beginning of their exposure so that even very young bilingual babies can recognise and distinguish the sounds of their two languages. Being bilingual also has advantages for learning new languages; having two languages, it seems, makes it easier to learn a third.
• **Literacy advantages**

Bilingual children tend to be more talented readers. Research suggests that they can have an advantage over monolingual children in understanding the relationship between written forms and their meanings. Such literacy skills can transfer across languages, especially if the languages use similar writing systems. For example, if both languages are alphabetic, that is, use an alphabet to write words like we do in English, bilingual children often understand the relationship between letters and sounds earlier than monolingual children do.

• **Better focusing abilities**

Bilingual children have been shown to outperform monolinguals when called upon to change between activities that demand attention to different sets of instructions. They seem to be better at focusing on the task at hand and ignoring distractions. This does not mean that bilingual children are any more intelligent, but simply that they have an extra set of abilities that they can put into use in a variety of situations. In addition, recent research suggests that having more than one language may also protect against dementia later in life.

• **Job prospects**

Knowing more than one language can have economic benefits and open up more job opportunities, particularly if the languages are important for trade or other economic activity. Even where they are not, the ability to negotiate different languages and cultures confers its own skills which are valuable in our increasingly global work environment.

The advantages for AMEP clients of maintaining family languages alongside English and raising their children bilingually, it seems, are many. However, the process of putting such a plan into practice is not always easy, especially when the AMEP clients themselves are also developing their skills in English. In the next chapter we look at different types of bilingual family situations in Australia and consider some of the factors that might influence the decisions families make about which languages they use.
Chapter 2

Deciding which languages to use

In this chapter we look at the factors that might influence the decisions families make about which languages they use at home.

The key issues covered:

- Decisions families make about which languages they speak in the home are crucial for whether or not they will be able to maintain their family languages alongside English and therefore ultimately whether or not they are able to raise their children bilingually.

- The structure of the family plays an important role in decisions about family language use. Maintaining family languages alongside English is crucial for family cohesion when there are extended family members who have limited English skills.

- Close connections with cultural communities both inside and outside Australia encourage the maintenance of family languages alongside English.

- Attitudes to different languages and towards bilingualism in general can influence family decisions about what languages to use.

- There can be considerable pressure on AMEP clients to use English as a family language. If they want to raise their children bilingually it is important that they are able to develop their own English skills as well as maintaining the use of the family language with their children.
The importance of planning language use

Bilingual families in Australia are linguistically and culturally diverse and can vary considerably from the stereotype of the nuclear family. Despite these variations, most migrants find that it is within the family that they most often use their L1, and so decisions families make about which language(s) to use are crucial for whether or not they are able to maintain their L1 alongside English and therefore whether or not the next generation becomes bilingual. While supportive educational programs and community and government policies are important, it is the family members who usually decide which languages are to be used at home. This means that an appropriate and achievable plan for family language use not only lays a crucial foundation for the bilingual development of children but ultimately determines if and how far the language is maintained in the community.

There are many factors that might influence a family’s decisions about which language(s) to use and why. The structure of the family, their connections with their cultural community, the attitudes towards the particular languages spoken by different family members, as well as opinions about the value of bilingualism more generally can all play a role in this decision making process.

The importance of family structure

The structure of the family – not only who lives at home, but also who is in the extended family, and what languages they speak – plays an important role in family language use. For example, the presence of family members who are non-English speakers or whose English skills are limited can encourage the use of the minority language.

The role of the extended family

Grandparents with little English can play an important role in helping their grandchildren to learn the minority language, particularly if the parents no longer use it regularly or are not able to spend much time with their children. Li Li Lin, for example, plays an important role in her grandson’s development of Mandarin:
Li Li Lin came to Australia to join her son and his family who have been living here for many years. Her teenage grandson speaks English with his parents, but has to speak Mandarin when talking to Li Li Lin because she cannot understand him when he speaks English. He attends Chinese school every Sunday and the family visit Li Li Lin afterwards for lunch. During these visits everyone speaks Mandarin.

Where there are a number of different relatives in an extended family, they may not only speak different languages but also have varying levels of proficiency. This can make it more complicated to decide exactly which language to use at home and pass on to the children. Should it be the language that most people in the family speak to some extent, or the language most people speak with the greatest proficiency? Or perhaps the language that is most widely spoken in the world? There are no easy answers to questions such as these, but they need to be considered as part of a family’s plan for language use.

The role of siblings

Siblings can be a particularly important influence on the languages their brothers and sisters choose to speak in the home. Older children who attend school often bring English into the home and use it with the younger children despite the efforts of their parent to use a different language. However, if they feel comfortable in the minority language, they might also reinforce its use with the younger children, both inside and outside the home, and this can support their parents’ efforts. Either way, they are an important factor to consider when developing a plan for family language use.

Cultural connections inside and outside Australia

Another factor that can impact on the decisions that families make about what languages to learn and use is the connection they have with members of their cultural community both inside and outside Australia. Strong connections with a community group can be both a powerful motivation and a useful support for parents who are considering whether to bring up their children bilingually. Parents may want to raise their children bilingually in order to help them understand the cultural values of their country of origin and to connect with
these communities both in Australia and overseas. Nfumu, for example, introduced in Chapter 1, wanted to make sure that his children could connect with the cultures he grew up with and so he saw the importance of passing Tshiluba on to his children – even though it is not widely spoken globally or in Australia - so that they could connect with family members in his village in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Similarly, Casey also felt that it was important for her daughter to be able to maintain this crucial link with her country of origin:

Casey is from the Czech Republic and is married to an Australian with Greek heritage. She is certain that she will never live in the Czech Republic again but she wants her daughter to learn Czech so that she can communicate when they go and visit her family there.

Not all migrants feel this need to retain or pass on this connection with the cultures they came from, particularly if their own experiences there were difficult, and this will impact on whether or not they want their children to learn their L1. Alex, for example, did not want to connect with his cultural group at all. He wanted to identify with the Australian culture and language, and this influenced his family language use decisions:

Alex grew up in the Middle East and told us that now he is in Australia he feels he belongs here and sees himself as having no other citizenship or nationality. He has decided to settle here for the rest of his life and raise his children to be Australian only. He has made the conscious decision to interact with Australians and speaks mainly English in his everyday life. The only place he speaks Arabic on a regular basis is at home with his wife and he commented that he should have stopped that a long time ago. He continues to speak some Arabic with her because she finds it difficult at times to speak English.
Attitudes towards different languages and bilingualism

In bilingual families, it is not only the connections that parents have with their language community and their country of origin that influence family language use decisions. Their attitude to those languages and to bilingualism in general is also central to the choices they make about which languages to use and whether they are worth maintaining in the family. These beliefs therefore shape the decisions parents make about which language(s) their children should use.

Language status and usefulness

Beliefs about the status or future usefulness of a particular language will often have developed over time and can influence whether or not parents think it is worth passing on to their children. Robert, for example, grew up in a multilingual family where his parents’ views on the importance of different languages shaped his own language learning as a child:

*Robert was born in Liberia but grew up in Guinea. He learned his first language English, as spoken in Liberia, from his mother who felt it would be more useful to him than her own language, Mande. Consequently, Robert does not speak Mande at all. He did, however, learn his father’s language, Fulani.*

So whether or not parents decide to continue to speak or pass on their language to their children can be related to how important they think it is globally or in Australia or for their family life. Because English is not only the language of the community, but also an important
language for global communication, it can be easy for parents to see its relevance in their lives and that of their children. However, if they or others consider that their L1 has a lowly status among world languages, they may wonder how useful it would be to keep it going in the family.

As we saw in Chapter 1, attitudes to different languages are very much influenced by the level of power wielded by their speakers – this is how English came to be so popular worldwide. So speakers of a language that is only spoken in a localised region of the world may doubt the value of continuing to speak it in the home, even though it is linked to their heritage, and family members may not be able to communicate effectively without it. Some may even consider that the language they speak is only a dialect, and may not consider it to be worth learning. Lourdes, from the Philippines, expresses such a view about her language, Visayan:

*Lourdes was born in the Philippines and when talking about the languages she speaks, described Tagalog as the national language of the Philippines that everyone speaks, and her own language which she uses with her local friends as one of 30 local dialects.*

As discussed in Chapter 1, however, whether a variety is considered a dialect or a language has nothing to do with its integrity as a language and everything to do with its position in world politics. And there are many social and emotional reasons why maintaining it in the home might be worthwhile, even if it is not a language used for global communication.

**The value of bilingualism**

Beliefs about the value of being bilingual in general can influence family language use decisions. If a family or community believes that bilingualism is positive – that it brings benefits and is well regarded by the wider community – then they will be more committed to passing their language on to their children. Negative beliefs can have the opposite effect. Public controversies related to immigration and English proficiency can lead to negative community attitudes that have the potential to influence parents’ language use at home. Parents who are concerned that their children will be viewed negatively at school because
of their different background – by either teachers or other students – may want them to fit in and become “Aussie”, and this might lead to them abandoning the use of their L1 with them.

REFLECTION POINTS

- How can AMEP clients be helped to reflect on their attitudes towards their languages and bilingualism?

- How do you feel about the languages you speak? How would you decide which language to pass on to your children?

The pressure to use English as a family language

In families where all members do not share all their languages, there are particular challenges in maintaining multiple languages at home and the pressure to use English can be strong, particularly if English is the language which the parents use to communicate.

Jeannie, mentioned in Chapter 1, is a native speaker of Mandarin married to a native speaker of French, but English became their family language by default as neither Jeannie nor her son speaks French, and her husband does not speak much Mandarin. When they first arrived in Australia from China, Jeannie made a conscious decision to speak only English to her 9 year old son because she understood the importance of English and she wanted to help him – and perhaps also herself – to learn it more quickly. However, as we saw in Chapter 1, when she travelled back to China with him to visit relatives some time later and found that he had lost the ability to communicate fluently in Mandarin, she reflected that this might not have been the right decision if she wanted him to become bilingual.

When one parent is a native speaker of English

The pressure to use English as a family language is much increased when one parent is a native speaker of English. While this can help migrants and their children enormously in their own English language development, it can also make it more difficult for families to
raise their children bilingually. It is crucial that parents negotiate an approach to how languages are used in the family and agree on how to do this. However, this is not always straightforward, particularly if the parents are not equally committed or do not value the languages in the same way. When one parent is openly dismissive of the other’s language, as in the case of Lourdes’ husband, it can become increasingly difficult to maintain that language in the home alongside English:

**Lourdes is married to a native-English speaker from Britain. She would like her children to learn her language (Visayan) but feels that it is difficult because English is the only language spoken in her home, and her children only hear her speaking Visayan when she talks to her family on Skype. Although her daughter has shown some interest in what Lourdes is talking about on these occasions, she shows little interest in learning the language. Lourdes feels this is because her husband always tells their daughter not to talk “this rubbish second language”.**

Even native-speaking partners who are quite proficient in and value their partner’s language may be reluctant to speak it at home when they are busy and tired. This obviously makes it very difficult to use it at home or with the children. Tomoko’s husband, for example, was quite enthusiastic to learn and use Japanese while they were living in Japan, but once they came to Australia, he lost motivation:

**Tomoko and her Australian husband met in Japan. Her husband spoke Japanese when they were in Japan, but now that they live in Australia with his parents, they speak mostly English at home. He often says he is too tired to speak Japanese with her because he is working and studying during the day, and busy with assignments in the evening. This means that they tend to use English, and so it is Tomoko who has to struggle to express herself in a language she is learning. She has started using some Japanese words with him when she is too tired to use English and finds that he can usually understand what she means.**

All bilingual families face the challenge of balancing the use of English and their other language(s), and some newly-arrived migrants who are working hard to cope with everyday
life through English may feel the need to focus on becoming more competent in that language rather than helping their partners (and children) learn their own L1. This was the case for Mary:

Mary is from Thailand and lives with her Australian husband and her two children from a previous marriage. In the beginning, when Mary and her children were learning English, her husband wanted to learn Thai so the family could speak in Thai as well as English, but Mary did not want him to. She felt that she and her children needed to learn English first, and only then would she help her husband to learn Thai.

However, there can also be benefits for migrants if they do not have to speak in English all the time. They can find it reassuring to be able to speak in their language at times, and to see that their partner is learning another language too. Learning any language as an adult can, at times, be frustrating. It can be demoralising to suddenly find that you cannot express yourself fully or understand completely what people are saying to you. Yet this is the experience of many AMEP clients at some point in their English language learning. In these circumstances, it can be very comforting for migrants to be able to speak their own L1 with someone in their family and to feel that they can express themselves clearly and without problems.
REFLECTION POINTS

- How can AMEP clients with native-English speaking partners maintain a balance between learning English and using their L1?

- What can AMEP clients do independently to develop their English skills at home?

- How might English-speaking partners of AMEP clients assist them at home to develop their own English skills while raising their children bilingually?

- What are the possible benefits to family life when the English-speaking partner learns the AMEP client’s first language?

When both parents share the same L1

When the same L1 is shared by both parents, it is usually this language they wish to pass on to their children. However, there are still plenty of decisions to be made about who uses the language, when and where. These can sometimes be quite straightforward as in the case of Li Ming (mentioned in Chapter 1) and her husband who are both from China and who speak only Mandarin at home to each other and to their children. This seems to have had very successful results for the children, both of whom speak Mandarin and English fluently. A strong sense of the need to maintain the first language in the home can help couples make the commitment to make this plan for family language use work.

Even with this commitment, however, raising children bilingually is not always easy, and it may take some careful planning to resist the temptation to use English at home, as Hawiye discovered:
Hawiye, his wife and two children are from Somalia. They are very keen for their children to maintain the Somali language and have encouraged them to use it at home. There are no other Somali speakers where they live in Australia, so his wife always uses Somali with the children and instructs them to do the same. If they speak in English, she tells them to switch. However, despite his strong desire for their children to speak Somali and despite his intentions to speak Somali at home, Hawiye finds that because he uses English so much outside the home, he sometimes forgets and uses English with his children. When he does, they remind him to use Somali!

**REFLECTION POINTS**

- What issues do you think parents who share the same L1 face in trying to raise their children bilingually?

- How can AMEP clients who share the same L1 as their partner make sure that they develop their English?

- What are the possible consequences if parents use English at home rather than their L1?

There are many influences on the decisions AMEP clients and their families make about their family language use. If they decide to maintain a family language, the risk is that their English learning and development will suffer. In the next chapter we look how AMEP clients can focus on their own English learning while also raising their children bilingually.
Chapter 3

Strategies for learning English outside class

In this chapter we look at strategies that AMEP clients can use to extend their English language learning outside class. We consider the important roles children can play, the ways an English speaking partner can help, and ideas for continued learning.

The key issues covered:

- Extending language learning outside of class is important for adult learners and there are many ways for AMEP clients to do this.
- Children can provide valuable opportunities for learning English.
- English speaking partners are also a valuable resource, but they need to know how best to help. We provide some suggestions.
- There are many opportunities for continued learning both within the AMEP and in the wider community.
Adult language learning

As mentioned in Chapter 1, it usually takes adults longer and more conscious effort to learn a language than it does children. AMEP clients learning English therefore need to be proactive about developing their English skills both in class and outside. While as parents they might feel it is important to maintain their L1 with their children, this should not be at the expense of their own English language learning.

Children and partners can play an important role in an AMEP client’s English language learning outside class.

Learning English with children

Young children can be patient and resourceful when talking to someone they cannot understand well, and the topics they want to talk about may also be simpler and easier to grasp. For example, Ludmilla, who was 71 years old when she started learning English with the AMEP, found it very helpful that her granddaughter made her speak English, and helped her learn new vocabulary:

\[\text{Ludmilla is from Russia, and found that her six year old granddaughter did not want to speak Russian with her – this meant she had to speak English with her. She described her granddaughter as a ‘good teacher’ because she had a simple way of explaining words Ludmilla did not know. For example, she would say the word ‘horse’ and then make a neighing sound.}\]

Reading books with children can help develop vocabulary, as well as literacy and pronunciation skills. Ping, for example, found reading books with her eight year old daughter helped her learn new words:

Reading books with children can help develop vocabulary, as well as literacy and pronunciation skills. Ping, for example, found reading books with her eight year old daughter helped her learn new words:
Ping arrived in Australia from Thailand with her eight year old daughter, so they were both learning English. Her Australian husband suggested that Ping read books with her daughter so they could learn to read English together. Her daughter, who could read better than Ping, was able to help her with words she didn’t know by telling her what they were in both English and Thai.

Participating in activities run by community organisations, such as local libraries, can also be beneficial for AMEP clients with young children. For example, attending bilingual story time (where stories are read in English and another language) or regular story time (where stories are read in English only) with a toddler, or rhyme time with a baby (involving nursery rhymes and songs for babies), can benefit an AMEP client’s English listening and reading skills, as well as providing an opportunity to interact with other parents using English. Attending local playgroups with young children also provides this opportunity to interact with other parents and children in English.

**REFLECTION POINT**

- What other activities can parents engage in with their children to help their English development outside class?

The role of the English speaking partner

Improving English language skills outside class can be easier for AMEP clients with partners who are either native speakers or more advanced learners of English. A partner who is positive and supportive can make an enormous difference to how an AMEP client feels about using and practising English outside class, but sometimes couples are unsure about how best to take advantage of this resource. We outline a few ways partners might help below.
Be patient and answer questions

AMEP clients who perceive their partner to be patient and supportive are more likely to ask questions about different aspects of their English learning. For example, Catherine asks her Australian partner to explain jokes:

Catherine is from Korea and has trouble understanding jokes she hears on TV. Her Australian partner is happy to answer her questions and to explain the jokes. His explanations do not always help her to fully understand the jokes, but she feels she has a better understanding of the cultural background behind them.

Watching TV together in English provides a perfect opportunity for AMEP clients and their partners to talk about different aspects of English that might come up, or for partners to explain something that was said or, as in the above example, to explain why something is funny.

Speak English

This might seem like a strange suggestion, but sometimes when life is busy an AMEP client might not spend much time with their partner, and therefore might not actually speak English with them much. Being married to a native speaker is not much of a resource if he/she is ‘too tired’ to talk when s/he gets home from work!

Some AMEP clients have partners who are proficient in both English and their L1, and unless they make a decision to speak English with each other, this might not happen, and they might end up using their L1 most of the time. This can be frustrating for the AMEP client who wants to practise English outside of class. Lila, for example, wanted her husband to speak English with her more:

Lila is from Colombia and speaks Spanish. She is married to an Australian with Colombian parents, so he speaks Spanish as well as English. Lila would like him to help her with her English but he tells her that he loves the way her Spanish sounds and would prefer to use Spanish with her. He does help her practise sometimes, but then gradually starts using Spanish again.
Provide encouragement to take risks with English use outside the home

Having to speak to strangers can be very scary for someone who is learning English, and even advanced learners can be worried that they won’t be able to express themselves clearly, respond appropriately or understand the other person. AMEP clients might find it easier if their partner is the one who speaks with others and takes care of things. While this might protect them from possible embarrassment, it also means that they do not improve. This is why some gentle pushing and constant encouragement from a supportive partner to take risks with their English use can help them improve and boost their confidence, as was the case for Joy:

Joy and her husband are both from China and moved to Sydney with their two children. When they decided to buy an apartment, Joy’s husband – who had studied in Australia and speaks English well – put her in charge of talking to the real estate agents. At first Joy had problems understanding the large numbers the agents quoted her but she found that by the end of it she had learned how to express these large numbers and felt more confident using English as a result.

To correct or not to correct?

Partners are a valuable resource when it comes to correcting mistakes, and it is important that they do not avoid this completely. However, it is also important that they address mistakes in a way that encourages rather than discourages and they are not overzealous with their corrections. Rather than correcting everything all the time, a useful way to approach this might be to decide together on a few things to focus on, and focus on these for an agreed period of time. For example, an AMEP client who has been working on the past tense in class might agree with her partner or other family members that they will correct any past tense mistakes at a particular time, for example while they are talking over dinner.

Understand the challenges

It is very tiring for someone learning English to keep on speaking it all the time without a break. Often, a partner’s friends and family will be English-speaking, so that social activities
will be in English and often in fast, colloquial English which is particularly difficult for a learner to understand. They might keep quiet in these circumstances although this may be out of character, as was the case for Lila who, as mentioned above, speaks mainly Spanish with her Australian born husband at home:

Lila and her husband went to dinner with her husband’s friends and the conversation was in English. She didn’t say a word. She was really upset with herself because she couldn’t think of anything to say. Her husband was upset with her too and told her she should try. It wasn’t that simple.

Learn the partner’s L1

It is motivating if we feel good about ourselves – success breeds success – and yet it can be very hard for a migrant who is learning English and about life in Australia to feel expert in anything. So it can help a client if their partner is also a language learner who is experiencing the same joys, frustrations and hard work as they are. This is only one of the reasons why it can be beneficial for couples to learn each other’s language!

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Continued learning

There are a number of ways AMEP clients can extend what they learn in class and thus develop their English skills further. These include:

• Look over materials that have already been covered in their AMEP classes;

• Sign up for other courses that they are interested in, e.g. sewing or cooking;

• Listen to English audio tapes;
• Use English with people in the community (e.g., childcare workers, other mothers and other children, shopkeepers) as much as possible;

• Continue attending English classes (LLNP or other post-AMEP language class options).

There are many strategies AMEP clients can use to develop their English skills outside class. In the next chapter we look at two main approaches they might take to raise their children bilingually at the same time.
Chapter 4
Approaches to raising children bilingually

In this chapter we will outline two different approaches to raising children bilingually and consider the factors that might influence family decisions to take one or the other. We will also consider some of the challenges parents might face along the way. A summary of approaches is given at the end of the chapter for easy reference.

The key issues covered:

- Raising children bilingually takes careful planning and considerable effort on the part of the parents.
- One approach parents might take is the one-location-one-language (OLOL) approach. In its simplest form this approach involves parents who share the same L1, using it in the home so that children come to associate a language with a particular place.
- Another is the one-parent-one-language (OPOL) approach. This is where each parent uses their own language with the child at all times so that children come to associate a language with a particular person.
- Each approach has its own challenges and it is important for the AMEP client to be aware of their own English development needs alongside their desire to raise their children bilingually.
A shared commitment

Raising children bilingually takes careful planning, shared commitment and considerable effort, but as we have seen in Chapter 1, there are significant advantages of being bilingual, for the children themselves and the family as a whole. There are a number of ways families can achieve this goal. Here we look at two of the main approaches they might take: one-location-one-language and one-parent-one-language.

One-location-one-language (OLOL)

Use only the family language at home

In its simplest form, an OLOL approach involves using only the family language in the home. When both parents share the same L1, they often choose to speak that language at home, that is they adopt an OLOL approach to passing that language on to their children. When both parents are more proficient in their L1 than they are in English, it is only natural that they would prefer to speak that language at home and to their children, as was the case with James:

*James and his wife are Karen-speaking refugees from Burma. At home they use exclusively Karen with each other and their two children. James has never heard his children speak English.*

For AMEP clients and their partners who, like James, have met in their home countries and migrated together, it is natural to adopt an OLOL approach and use their L1 at home. However, this approach might also be adopted by second generation migrants, that is, children of migrants, who are competent in both English and their parents’ L1, and want to pass that L1 on to their children. While parents may use their L1 with the children at all times, it is likely that they will have to speak English with them or in front of them at some point when they are outside the home. However, if the L1 is the only language that is ever
spoken inside the home, then the children will associate their family language with their home and their parents, and this provides a clear separation between the languages used in different domains.

What if the children prefer to speak English?

This approach can be quite straightforward and easy to maintain while the children are young and the family’s social circle is part of their language network. However, as the children grow older, go to school and become more competent in English, it can be difficult for parents to decide how strictly to enforce this separation of languages. Once children start school or pre-school and start using English outside the home for learning and with friends, English takes on a more important role in their lives and it may even become their dominant language. It may become increasingly difficult for parents to keep using the family language with children who want to speak in English and refuse to use any other language. This is a very common phenomenon among children who have just started school or pre-school, as they often do not want to stand out from the crowd but want to fit in with their classmates.

When children start to use English in the home, parents are often tempted to use English too in order to accommodate to their child and maintain smooth communication. This was the case for Youngsoon:

*Youngsoon wants her daughters to learn Korean, but once they started school, they started talking English with each other and with her mother. At this point, Youngsoon found that she was accommodating to their desire to speak English.*

While the children’s Korean has not yet suffered, the introduction of English into the household could mark the start of a more permanent language shift within the family. If her daughters’ English continues to improve at the expense of their Korean, Youngsoon may find that while she and her husband are most proficient in Korean, their children are most proficient in English. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this can result in a language gap in the family which may exacerbate communication problems when the children are older.
Alternatively, parents may wish to persist in using the family language, even if the children initiate a conversation in English. In this way, the children might at least acquire and maintain a passive knowledge of the language, and thus be able to understand what their parents are saying. They then have the potential to build on this foundation to make their language skills more active should they decide to do so at a later stage.

The need for flexibility

Once an OLOL approach has been chosen, there are still many situations in which the bilingual family will have to make choices about what language they will use, and each family has to develop principles to suit their situation. For example, when children who do not speak the family language come to the house to play, there will be an obvious need to switch to English. But what about friends who share the family language? They may come from families where a different approach is taken, or they may simply want to continue their friendships through English. If a family tries to enforce an OLOL approach too strictly, the parents run the risk of alienating their children and their friends, and in the long run this will be counterproductive to their efforts to encourage them to use the family language. If the parents do nothing and such visits are regular, however, then this can also threaten their OLOL approach long term.

A certain amount of flexibility with the OLOL approach will therefore be needed so that both the parents and the children can maintain social relationships outside the family. Families will frequently face a range of situations that will need to be tackled sensitively if the approach is to be applied consistently.
REFLECTION POINTS

- What other situations can you think of that may be problematic for families applying the OLOL approach, and how can they be managed?

- To what extent do you think parents can influence the language that children use with each other in the home?

- Are there situations where parents can or should forbid the use of English or any other language?

One-parent-one-language (OPOL)

The OPOL is often useful for families where one parent is a native speaker of English and the other speaks a different language. In families where this approach is taken, one parent uses one language with the children at all times while the second parent always uses another. In Australia, one of these languages is often English, but parents with different language backgrounds may also decide to each use a different language with their children so that they become trilingual.

One advantage to an OPOL approach is that it allows the children to learn both languages right from the start. However, the parent who is the primary caregiver will have the greatest impact on the children's language development when they are very young. If he or she speaks a language other than English and only uses that language with the children, they may be stronger in that language in their early years. This can sometimes give rise to the concern they will not be able to cope with playgroup, pre-school or kindergarten, particularly in families where the English-speaking partner works long hours and does not get to spend much time with the children:
Hong is from Vietnam and her husband is Australian. She uses Vietnamese with her daughter and her husband uses English. Her husband is concerned that their 2 year old daughter only answers back in Vietnamese at the moment. He insists that they encourage the girl to speak more in English to prepare her for school.

However, as discussed in Chapter 6, children often pick up English relatively quickly once they start interacting regularly with other English-speaking children.

The need for flexibility

Even a parent who is absolutely committed to always using their first language rather than English with the children will often encounter occasions when they cannot avoid using English in front of them. For example, they will need to use English when they go shopping or when they talk to the teachers at school. Similarly, they may need to speak English to English-speaking friends or to children who come to play.

Countering feelings of exclusion

It can be difficult to maintain an OPOL approach in families where each parent is not proficient in both languages. Problems can arise if parents feel excluded from conversations with the children in the language they do not speak well or do not speak at all. Parents may feel left out and children can feel caught in the middle. To counter these feelings, some families adopt an approach which is more like a one-parent-one-language-unless-we-are-all-together approach. The migrant only uses his or her first language with the children when their spouse is not around. As soon as they are all together, they use English.

Mary, mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, has adopted this approach so that her husband does not feel excluded. At home, she and the children speak mostly Thai, but they switch to English when her husband joins them. She feels that switching to English when he is around is less problematic for her than having to translate everything for him.
Mary explained:

“Mix Thai mix English when in ...house because ...I don’t want my husband get upset...When he stay with...the family we cannot because I have to explain to him okay... What what what you talking about? What story what going on? What happened? Okay we speak English. Finish story.”

REFLECTION POINTS

- What situations can you think of that can be problematic for families applying an OPOL approach? How can these situations be managed?

- Think about how an OPOL family would manage a range of situations? For example, what do you think they should do when they visit the children’s playgroup or school? When they are on a family trip out in public? What language would the migrant use with the extended family, for example, a mother-in-law? Would it be polite/ impolite for the migrant parent to use their L1 with the children in front of monolingual English speaking friends?

- Do you think they should use English with the child under certain circumstances? Why/ why not? Which situations?

A balancing act

Whichever approach AMEP clients decide to take to raising their children bilingually, they need to be aware of and proactive about their own need to develop their English skills. Taking an OLOL or OPOL approach might be instrumental in their children becoming bilingual. However, the person who provides the children with the opportunity to use a language other than English needs to ensure that their own English learning does not suffer. For example, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Li Ming’s daughter, at the age of 11, was able to
switch from Mandarin to English depending on who she was speaking with. For Li Ming, however, the situation was different:

*Li Ming and her husband have been able to raise their children bilingually by speaking only Mandarin at home. However, Li Ming’s husband, whose English skills are more advanced than hers, describes his wife as not being able to speak English. She uses very little English in her everyday life, and would like to have more English lessons but feels that she can’t because she has such a busy life, working and looking after her family. She works in a business with both Chinese and Australian colleagues, but only uses very limited social English with the Australians. She also has a strong group of Chinese friends, and so uses very little English socially.*

In such circumstances, an OLOL approach might disadvantage the parent who has limited English language contact outside the home.

**REFLECTION POINTS**

- Li Ming’s children are bilingual and her husband has advanced English skills and uses English in his everyday life, but what about Li Ming? She has been instrumental in raising bilingual children but at what cost to her own English learning? What ramifications could this have in the future?

- What might she do to improve her own English skills?

Each of the approaches we have considered in this chapter presents its own challenges to AMEP clients who want to maintain a family language alongside English and thus raise their children bilingually. In the next chapter, we look at some of the strategies they can use to increase the relevance of the family language to their children and so encourage them to use it more often and in more situations, while at the same time concentrating on developing their own skills in English.
Chapter 5
Strategies for raising children bilingually

In this chapter we look at strategies AMEP clients might use to encourage their children to use the family language. The reflection points focus on how they might do this without jeopardising the development of their own English skills.

The key issues covered:

- Strategies that AMEP clients can use to help their children become bilingual are also relevant to their own English language development.
- It is important that there is a reason to use the language.
- It helps if there is interaction with community groups, or family and friends who use the language.
- Language tuition helps.
- Media, books and the internet provide opportunities to engage with the language.
Learning a language by using it

Generally, most people find it easier to learn (and remember) a language if they have to use it for something that is important to them. Children are no exception. They won’t learn a particular family language just because their parents want them to, and will eventually prefer to speak only English unless the family language has some relevance for them. Here we look at some strategies parents can use to make their family language relevant to their children, and thus encourage them to see the importance of using it.

Use the family language with the children

The most effective strategy that parents can use to raise their children bilingually is to talk to them right from birth in the language they want them to learn. This may sound simple, but it can also be easily overlooked under the pressures of everyday life. Parents may be working long hours so that contact with the children can sometimes be brief and buried under a mound of routine tasks. Talking to children from a very early age, even when they are only a few days old, is important so that they get used to hearing the language, and so that the parents get into the habit of using it with them. It does not matter what parents talk to their children about: task-based talk about everyday family chores, political or spiritual discussions or conversations about the child’s homework can all serve to establish a reason for them to learn and use the language. It can also be very useful for other family members to get involved. As mentioned in Chapter 2, members of a child’s extended family can play an important role in their bilingual development. Grandparents with limited English but lots of time to talk can make speaking the family language very relevant to a child.
REFLECTION POINT

- If an AMEP client decides to use only their L1 at home with their children, how can they create opportunities to also speak English and work on improving their own English skills outside class?

Interact with the language community

Interaction with other speakers of a language can be a very important motivation for children to learn that language. This makes the language community an important resource where they get to speak their language, celebrate national festivals, discuss current events in their home country and generally connect with their culture. These groups can take a range of different forms and may centre on a particular activity:

Peter is an elder of both the Bari and the wider Sudanese community in Perth. These groups get together to talk about problems people have, to help each other and to discuss conflicts between the various Sudanese groupings within the community.

Anne is part of a Filipino-Australian group whose purpose in meeting is to provide an opportunity for Filipino-Australian couples to get together and socialise and meeting others from their home country who also live in Australia. This gives them a space in which they can use their language and talk about any issues they have adjusting to life in Australia.

Mary, from Columbia, and her son attend a playgroup that uses Spanish as the main language of communication. At the playgroup, which meets once or twice a week, the group leader teaches the children Spanish by singing and dancing with them. The group also gives Mary the chance to speak in Spanish with the other mothers about their children and their lives in Australia.
Tina and her husband attend a Mandarin-speaking church every week. The regular service and other church events have given them both the opportunity to meet new people and make many friends.

These kinds of regular social contacts and friendships with other speakers of the language can provide an additional environment where children need to speak the language and can learn the traditions of the cultural group. Meeting other speakers of the language also gives children a broader understanding of how and where the language is used so that they develop a sense of the scope of variation within the language, such as generational, regional or gender differences in the way people speak, or differences between formal and informal speech. Using the language with different people also offers children the opportunity to expand their vocabulary and to learn to use the language to talk about a greater variety of topics. Finally, community groups can be a good place for children to meet other children their age who speak the same language, and this can be a great motivation for them to keep using it. Research indicates that children who have a peer group with whom they can speak the language are more likely to continue to speak it when they get older.

**REFLECTION POINT**

- Cultural community groups are important for maintaining the family language connected to that culture. What kinds of community groups do you know of that would encourage an AMEP client to use English?

**Maintain contact with family and friends from overseas**

Maintaining contact with family and friends who still live in their country of origin or in other countries where English is not spoken can also provide a good incentive for children to learn, improve and keep up their language skills. Similarly, house guests who cannot speak English very well but who speak the language the parents want the children to learn can provide an authentic reason for the children to actually use that language. This was Hong’s experience after her mother came to stay:
Hong’s mother came to stay with her for 6 months to help her after her daughter was born. During that time, Hong automatically spoke more Vietnamese, as her mother does not speak any English. Now that the daughter is 2 years old they want the grandmother to stay and help with the child once again. One of the added advantages is that her daughter will automatically use more Vietnamese with her grandmother.

Visits to their parent’s country of origin for an extended holiday can also be motivating for children. Being surrounded by their parents’ language and culture, and by family, friends and other children who speak that language enables the children to experience the language in a dynamic context where it is not just a minority language spoken by adults at home. While such boosts to children’s language competence may wane after the family returns home, they can serve to establish a useful foundation and motivation for their continued language learning, and parents can capitalise on the gains made by building on these experiences, like Xiao Mei:

Xiao Mei moved to Australia from her native China with her Anglo-Australian husband and their 5 year old son. Her husband cannot understand Mandarin and so they used mostly used English at home. After a while, her son’s Mandarin began to deteriorate. However, after a long trip back to China his Mandarin improved dramatically. When they returned to Australia, she started sending him to Mandarin classes to help him maintain his language skills.
REFLECTION POINT

- Maintaining contact with friends and family overseas can encourage a child’s bilingual development. However, it might also impact on what English the parents have learned and slow down their further English development. What might they do to maintain their English skills during these visits?

Language tuition

Weekend language schools

Many communities have Saturday or after hour schools which offer language classes for children. These often approach and understand the language in a more standardised and academic way, and offer parents the opportunity for their children to become literate in their language:

*Kin and his wife are both from China and they use Mandarin at home with their young son. Once their son started primary school and learned to read and write in English, they decided to also send him to Mandarin classes at the weekend where he learns to read and write Mandarin characters with other children his age.*

If these weekend schools generate and maintain enthusiasm for the language and help children to make friends they can use the language with, then they can be a strong motivating factor. They can provide an additional reason for learning and using the language as well as an important source of information and reading materials in the language. However, if classes are perceived as boring or interfering with other activities that they would rather do at the weekend, they can also be de-motivating and the cause of tension within the family.
Do-it-yourself language tuition

Language schools or qualified language teachers are not always available, especially if the migrant group is very small, widely dispersed, in a rural area or if their language is primarily spoken rather than written. Some AMEP clients might therefore take on the role of teacher themselves in order to ensure that their children gain at least some basic literacy skills in their language. This can be demanding for both parents and children, especially if it involves learning a different alphabet. Families who speak Arabic or Urdu, for example, will need to introduce their children to another alphabet. Learning to become literate in languages which use a completely different system of writing altogether, like Chinese, where each character represents a syllable, can be even more challenging for children and parents alike.

While parents who speak commonly-used languages often have the choice of a wide variety of different books and stories—and some even manage to access school materials from their home country—others can experience difficulties finding child-appropriate resources in their language. Books in these languages may not be easily available in bookstores in Australia or online, or in some cases, they may not exist at all. Parents from Sudan, for example, are likely to have more difficulties finding children books written in Bari than those from China, who can easily access a whole variety of TV shows and books in Mandarin.

Parents who experience problems sourcing appropriate materials can sometimes find it easier to write their own stories or translate them from another language. Parents often find that creating stories—maybe even bilingual stories—together with their children can be a fun learning experience. The following example taken from Sneddon (2011) illustrates how this can be done:

Magda’s mother is Albanian, and Magda has been learning to read and write in Albanian, too. After a holiday in Albania, Magda wrote a short story about her holiday in English and she also illustrated her story. Then Magda, together with her mother, translated her story into Albanian and they turned it into a bilingual book. She is very proud of her achievement and has since written another bilingual story.
In the above example, Magda needed to understand the English version of her daughter’s story to translate it into Albanian, so this activity draws on her own English literacy at the same time as developing her daughter’s Albanian literacy. What other activities might AMEP clients engage in with their children to develop their English literacy as well as their children’s bilingual literacy?

**Media, books and the internet**

Modern media can provide a range of opportunities for children to use and develop their language skills. Movies, TV shows and audio-books in the relevant language can expose the children to the story-telling conventions of the language and can be a fun way for them to expand their vocabulary and cultural understanding. There might be favourite movies they know from their Australian viewing dubbed into the relevant language, or shows that they liked watching when on trips to their parents’ home country. Reading stories together can also be a good way for children to spend quality time with extended family members who use the family language and can help them become familiar with some aspects of the cultural life in the home country.

**REFLECTION POINT**

- Media, books and the internet provide many opportunities for children to use and interact with the family language. How might they also be utilised by AMEP clients to develop their English skills?

In Appendix A, we provide a summary of some of the strategies for language learning that have been discussed so far in this volume. This in chart form for ease of reference and can also be easily copied for use with classes or discussion in groups. A list of resources that
parents can draw on as they raise their children bilingually and learn English themselves is also provided at the end of the book.

In the following chapter we recap some of the issues raised so far and address some of the questions that parents often have about raising their children bilingually.
## Chapter 6

### Frequently asked questions

In this chapter we address some of the common questions AMEP clients might have about raising their children bilingually in Australia while at the same time concentrating on their own English learning needs. Many of these ideas have already been discussed in previous chapters, but here we present them as responses to 13 frequently asked questions (FAQs). We present the questions and answers in two different formats. We start by providing detailed responses to these questions and dispelling some of the common myths surrounding bilingualism.

How these FAQs could be used:

- The information here can be used to answer questions AMEP teachers, counsellors or AMEP clients might have, or to stimulate discussions in the classroom or professional development contexts.
- Questions relevant to a particular class might be given as a topic to discuss or write about in small groups followed by a whole class discussion. Such an activity would be more suitable for use in a CSWE III class, but could be adapted for use in lower level classes.
- The FAQ chart is for quick reference and might be enlarged and displayed in a classroom for ongoing reference and discussion.
- The information in this chapter provides background information for some discussions that might arise from the stories presented in Chapters 7 and 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can I help my child learn both languages?</td>
<td>Consider the amount of time your child spends with each language and try to make sure both languages are used naturally. Also, be patient and allow your child time to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will my child become confused by learning two languages?</td>
<td>Research has shown that children who learn two languages do not become confused, but instead develop a stronger understanding of both languages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I ensure my child learns both languages?</td>
<td>Give your child equal exposure to both languages, provide separate language environments for different activities, and encourage your child to play in both languages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will my child have difficulty with learning in English?</td>
<td>Learning in two languages can actually help children learn English faster because they will have a stronger grasp of language in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I help my child learn a second language at home?</td>
<td>Use books, songs, and games in your child's second language to create a natural learning environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will my child have difficulty with reading in English?</td>
<td>Reading in both languages can help children develop better reading skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I help my child learn a second language at school?</td>
<td>Encourage your child to use both languages at school, and let teachers know you support your child's bilingualism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will my child have difficulty with writing in English?</td>
<td>Writing in both languages can help children develop better writing skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I help my child learn a second language at home?</td>
<td>Use books, songs, and games in your child's second language to create a natural learning environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will my child have difficulty with speaking in English?</td>
<td>Speaking in both languages can help children develop better speaking skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I help my child learn a second language at school?</td>
<td>Encourage your child to use both languages at school, and let teachers know you support your child's bilingualism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will my child have difficulty with listening in English?</td>
<td>Listening to both languages can help children develop better listening skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### How these FAQs could be used:

- The information here can be used to answer questions AMEP teachers, counsellors or AMEP clients might have, or to stimulate discussions in the classroom or professional development contexts.
- Questions relevant to a particular class might be given as a topic to discuss or write about in small groups followed by a whole class discussion. Such an activity would be more suitable for use in a CSWE III class, but could be adapted for use in lower level classes.
- The FAQ chart is for quick reference and might be enlarged and displayed in a classroom for ongoing reference and discussion.
- The information in this chapter provides background information for some discussions that might arise from the stories presented in Chapters 7 and 8.
FAQ 1
What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism can be very broadly described as the ability to speak two or more languages. Bilinguals do not necessarily speak their languages equally well and may be more proficient or feel more comfortable in one language rather than another—that is, one language may be dominant. They may often use their languages for different purposes and in different domains of their lives. For example, bilinguals may use one language at work and another at home. As a result, they may feel less comfortable using their home language to explain work related issues and vice versa, and may also be able to speak but not write in some of their languages, particularly if they have never had any official schooling in that language.

**Myth: Only gifted children can become bilingual**

- Not true! The ability to become bilingual is not about the level of intelligence and does not require a special gift for languages. Anyone can become bilingual if they live in an environment that encourages and supports their language learning. People of all educational backgrounds, social classes and ages from all regions of the world can become perfectly functional bilinguals if they need to.

FAQ 2
Why should migrants raise their children bilingually?

There are strong social and emotional reasons for families to raise their children bilingually. A shared language can help create a strong bond. Learning their parents’ L1 can help children to understand them and their culture better and therefore potentially to identify more strongly with both. Children who do not learn their parents’ languages may not be able to talk to their grandparents or other family members or friends who do not speak English. This can potentially isolate them from parts of their family and the migrant
community, and undermine their sense of belonging and identity. If children and parents do not share a language in which they are both proficient then they may find it difficult to communicate, particularly in times of stress or relationship difficulties that sometimes surface during adolescence. So if parents do not learn English as quickly as their children and the children cannot speak their parents’ language there may be communication difficulties. If, in addition, the children do not understand the cultural values their parents brought with them to Australia, tensions within the family can become quite serious.

**Myth: Bilingualism is the exception, not the norm**

- Not true! While many western societies are monolingual in that there is only one official language used in government and taught in schools, over half of the world’s population in fact uses two or more languages on a regular basis. This includes countries with official bilingualism, such as Switzerland or Belgium; countries with high levels of migration; and countries with a high number of local languages (e.g. Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Democratic Republic of Congo). In fact, bilingualism is the norm rather than the exception.

**FAQ 3**

What practical benefits are there to being bilingual?

Being able to speak more than one language can open up a whole new world—a new culture to experience, new people to meet, new literature to read, a new way of looking at things—and this brings with it a whole range of benefits. In addition to social and emotional benefits to family life described above, a bilingual upbringing can also confer cognitive and economic benefits.

Bilingual children are thought to be more creative and flexible in the way they approach problems, as they are used to expressing thoughts and ideas in different ways. Research suggests that their understanding of more than one language and culture can make them more tolerant towards others. Moreover, an understanding of how two or more languages
work at an early age will make learning subsequent languages much easier. Bilingualism can also bring economic benefits. People who are both fluent in more than one language and have a good understanding of different cultural norms may be in demand for both their language skills and their cultural understanding. This can help employment prospects in a range of occupations, including in business, tourism, medicine, trade, academia, education, professional translation and interpreting, etc.

Myth: Learning the language means automatically adopting the culture

- Not true! Some parents might equate learning a language with adopting the culture, but this is not necessarily the case. While being bilingual can give children exposure to more than one culture, learning their parents’ language will not necessarily mean they will adopt their cultural values, beliefs and practices. Just by learning the language they will not necessarily learn about cultural rules, such as when to shake hands or kiss someone as a greeting, or whether or not to make eye contact. Children growing up in Australia are likely to orient to both Australian cultural values, beliefs and practices and those of their parents, that is, they are likely to understand something of both and become in some way culturally hybrid. If parents want their children to understand their cultural practices, values and the way of thinking that is common in their home country, then they may have to teach these actively.

FAQ 4
Are children disadvantaged if they go to school/ pre-school without knowing any English?

Children can learn a language very quickly and can learn several languages at the same time with greater ease than adults. Even when they do not learn English until they start school, migrant children can often make great gains and interact easily with their peers within only a few months. The need to be able to talk to their classmates and understand their teachers seems to enable them to learn a language quickly at school. However, children are very
different from adults. Some may be more anxious than others about starting in a new environment and may feel more confident if they can speak some English before they start, especially if they live in very strong communities and are not exposed to much English outside the home.

Myth: Using only the family language with your child will delay their development of English and they will have problems at school

- Not true! While there might be an adjustment period at the very beginning of starting school where children stay quiet and/or make errors, children tend to learn languages really quickly. Since English is the language of instruction, English will also be the language that the children use to learn and think about what they are learning at school. In a few months, bilingual children are likely to have caught up with their peers as their language skills in English develop. These will often quickly surpass the skills they have in their minority language as the children learn about different topics through English.

FAQ 5
Will hearing more than one language be confusing?

Children will not be confused to hear their parents speak different languages with them, particularly if they are consistent in the languages they use and if they start using them regularly from the time of their birth. Consistency in language use is important when raising bilingual children.
Myth: Raising children in a bilingual environment is confusing for them

- Not true! Research shows that even from birth children are able to differentiate between two or more languages. While young children commonly use words from both languages and sometimes mix them together when they reach the two-word stage, they are able to accommodate to the language preferences of the people they are talking to (e.g. using more of the mother’s language when talking to the mother and more of the father’s language when talking to the father). They can also use appropriate grammatical structures and sound systems in each language. Any confusion in the early stages is usually resolved as they grow older and learn to differentiate the two language systems more accurately.

FAQ 6
Do bilingual children have slower language development?

As far as the basic stages of language learning are concerned, the process of language development is the same for bilingual as for monolingual children. In both cases children vary widely in when they start to speak and what they say when they do. Most children start saying their first words when they are 1 or 2 years old and then begin to utter simple two-word sentences followed by more complex sentences when they reach 2 to 3 years. However, there are some monolingual and some bilingual children who start speaking later than this. While some experts believe that it may take some bilingual children a little longer to start to speak, they argue that this is because they are adjusting their system to accommodate two languages, and that this is a good thing as it allows the whole system to become more flexible and this can help when they come to learn other languages later in life.
Myth: Bilinguals never learn any language properly

- Not true! Bilingual children growing up in Australia can become just as proficient in English as their monolingual peers. Bilinguals often have a dominant language, that is, a language in which they feel most comfortable. While this is often the language they were educated in, some bilinguals feel more comfortable using different languages in different domains of their life. For example, they may feel more comfortable talking about their feelings in the language they spoke in the home when they were growing up, but find it easier to discuss politics or football in the language they used at school.

FAQ 7
When should parents be concerned about their children’s language development?

Opinions differ as to exactly when parents should become concerned about their children’s language development. As discussed above, children vary enormously in when they start to speak and when they start to construct simple sentences, so that there is no hard and fast rule about what constitutes language delay, and consequently when parents should start to consider seeking assistance. Most children are able to say about 10 words by the time they are one-and-a-half, and construct two-word sentences and more complex sentences by the age of two-and-a-half. However, some children may not say anything until they are two years old and then start with two-word structures right away. If a child does not seem to be reaching these milestones, especially if they also appear to be behind other children of a similar age in any other aspect of their social or cognitive development, then it may be reassuring for parents to seek professional help since most development issues are best tackled as early as possible. Parents should, of course, consult a specialist at any stage if they are concerned – if only for their peace of mind!
Myth: Mixing languages is a sign that speakers cannot speak the languages properly

- Not true! Mixing languages can be a powerful and creative form of self-expression for bilinguals – children and adults alike – and is therefore not something that parents should worry about unless there are some other causes for concern. Many bilinguals are very skillful at mixing languages and do this as part of their style of communication, often when they are talking to other bilinguals as a sign of common group membership. In the very early stages of their language development, some bilingual children may start combining words from the different languages, but this is normal and will stop when they learn to differentiate them more accurately.

FAQ 8
How do children become bilingual?

Children, just like adults, become bilingual when they need to. In other words, they learn a language when they need to communicate with or understand people and contexts where that language is spoken. It is important that they are able to hear and use it often and in as wide a variety of situations and contexts as possible. So if a parent does not use the language with them consistently or often switches to English, the children may not feel the need to learn to speak it. Some parents adopt a one-parent-one-language approach, where each parent uses his or her language with the child. This is especially useful where the parents do not share a common language background. Families where the parents share a common language might adopt a one-location-one-parent-approach and use the family language at home and English outside. The success of either approach depends on having a shared family plan about language use that is followed consistently but sensitively to suit the circumstances (See Chapter 4 for more details), and on using a range of strategies to motivate and support the children’s language development (see Chapter 5).
FAQ 9
What language should parents use with their children?

It is important that parents use a language that they are comfortable with and can speak proficiently with their children so that communication can be effective and the children will hear good language models. If they choose to use a language they are not proficient in, parents may find that their children quickly become more proficient than they are. This can not only interfere with good communication, but may also sometimes lead to a loss of respect if the child feels that they have greater skill.

FAQ 10
Do children whose parents are non-native speakers of English pick up their foreign accent?

Migrant parents who decide to raise their children in English or need to speak English in front of their children on occasion do not need to worry that the children will pick up their foreign accents. Children tend to copy the way they speak much more from other children and from other influences, such as TV shows, than from their parents. So a child with a French father and a Chinese mother who grows up in Australia will most likely adopt an Australian English accent, but may also be able to speak English with a French or Chinese accent when they want to.

FAQ 11
What are the possible consequences if children do not learn their parents’ L1?

For many migrant parents, it is important to use their first language with their children because that’s the language in which they can best express themselves, the language through which they can articulate their emotions most accurately and the language of their home, their culture and their family. Children who do not share this language may not be
able to communicate very well with the extended family overseas and may never quite understand the culture and the values that their parents brought with them from their country of origin. This means they may not fully understand a very important aspect of their identity and cultural heritage. At times of stress, this can exacerbate conflict within the family and lead to feelings of exclusion and isolation.

**Myth: Bilingualism is good only when it involves important or useful languages**

- Not true! While there might be some clear economic benefits to being bilingual in languages that are widely spoken or used in international trade, the benefits of bilingualism for the child and for the family are similar regardless of the status of the language. In other words: it is just as important for children in migrant families who speak a lesser-used language to learn that language as it is for children with parents who speak more widely used languages. The importance of the language for increasing understanding and communication within the family and for the children to develop a healthy cultural identity is the same. Moreover, knowing another language – whatever it is – confers cognitive advantages (see above) and is a gateway to understanding a different culture. Knowing a lesser-used language can also bring economic advantage if bilingual speakers of those languages are in short supply. This combination of linguistic and cultural proficiency could represent a niche skill that may be sought after by a variety of professions or organisations.

**FAQ 12**

*What are the possible consequences if parents cannot speak English very well?*

There are some potentially serious consequences to family harmony if the parents do not continue to develop their English skills. Parents with little knowledge of English may feel
excluded within their own family if everyone else is more proficient than they are. They may also be excluded from major aspects of their children’s lives as, for instance, they may struggle helping their children with their homework or be unable to communicate well with their children’s friends or teachers. Some parents with little English proficiency may also become over reliant on their children to help them with everyday tasks, from reading letters to answering the phone or interpreting for them at the doctors. This can place a great burden on the child and, in some cases, may even lead to the child losing respect for their parents, causing tensions within the family.

FAQ 13
What can parents do to help them improve their English skills while raising their children bilingually at the same time?

Parents can pursue a range of strategies to ensure they can improve their English language while raising their children bilingually. For example, they can:

- Continue attending English language classes.
- Go over their AMEP materials even after they stop going to classes.
- Practice English with their children outside the home.
- Find opportunities to practice English with others: talk to childcare workers, children, and parents of their children’s classmates every day.
- Take a further education or community class they are interested in and use English there.

A summary of the most frequently asked questions regarding raising children bilingually can be found in Appendix B. This is in chart form for ease of reference and so that it can be photocopied and easily used as the basis of discussion with classes or in other groups.
Chapter 7
Stories of AMEP client experiences for professional development

In the next two chapters we provide a collection of stories that teachers can use in the classroom to raise awareness and stimulate discussion about some of the issues AMEP clients might be facing as they raise their children bilingually and learn English themselves. These come from accounts given to us by the participants in both phases of the longitudinal research project funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship: Phase 1 – Language Training and Settlement Success: Are they related? and Phase 2 – AMEP Longitudinal study. They therefore reflect the kinds of issues faced by migrants who are studying, living, and working in Australia.

In Chapter 7 the stories contain more detail and are followed by reflection points so that they be used as a professional development resource with those who are teaching or working with AMEP clients, either to increase their own understanding of issues faced by clients or as preparation for discussing them with clients either in class or in counselling sessions.

How AMEP teachers and counsellors might use these stories for professional development:

- The stories are provided on separate pages so they can be photocopied for use in professional development sessions.
- The issues highlighted in each story are provided at the beginning of the story.
- Each story is followed by some ideas for reflection and discussion.
Issues raised in the stories

1. Li Ming (CSWE I)

This story highlights some of the issues AMEP clients face when they are from the same language background as their partner and want to continue to speak and pass their language on to their children.

2. Hua (CSWE I)

This story highlights a strategy used by an AMEP client who is married to a native speaker of English, but wants to pass her language on to her daughter.

3. Lourdes (CSWE III)

This story highlights the impact that parents' beliefs about language can have on their language choices and the importance of agreeing on a plan for family language use.

4. Jeannie (CSWE III)

This story highlights some of the issues that AMEP clients might face when family members are from different language backgrounds.

5. Charles (CSWE III)

This story highlights some of the issues faced by AMEP clients who want to practise their English at home, but all family members speak the family language.

6. Peter (Pre-CSWE)

This story highlights some of the issues faced by large families in which different generations live together.
1. Li Ming (CSWE I)

This story highlights some of the issues AMEP clients face when they are from the same language background as their partner and want to continue to speak and pass their language on to their children.

Li Ming and her husband are both from China. They speak Mandarin at home to each other and to their children, a 24 year old son (Cheng) and an 11 year old daughter (Jia). Cheng and Jia generally speak Mandarin at home but sometimes speak English to each other. They both speak English with an Australian accent and are able to switch between English and Mandarin depending on who they are talking to.

Li Ming and her husband have been able to raise their children bilingually by speaking only Mandarin at home. However, Li Ming’s husband, whose English skills are more advanced than hers, describes his wife as not being able to speak English. She uses very little English in her everyday life, and would like to have more English lessons but feels that she can’t because she has such a busy life, working and looking after her family. She works in a business with both Chinese and Australian colleagues, but only uses very limited social English with the Australians. She also has a strong group of Chinese friends, and so uses very little English socially. Jia is happy to help Li Ming with her English, but Cheng refuses to speak English with her.
Suggestions for reflection points:

1. The decision (whether or not it was a conscious one) to speak only Mandarin at home seems to have been successful at this stage in terms of the bilingual outcome for the children. Li Ming has been instrumental in raising bilingual children but at what cost to her own English learning? What ramifications could this have in the future?

2. What might Li Ming do to improve her own English skills?

3. How might Li Ming’s husband help her develop her English skills further?
2. Hua (CSWE I)

This story highlights a strategy used by an AMEP client who is married to a native speaker of English, but wants to pass her language on to her daughter.

Hua, from China is married to an Australian and they have a 2 ½ year old daughter, Mei, who was born in Australia. Hua’s husband is a monolingual English speaker, and when Mei was born they decided to adopt a one person-one language approach, in which the plan was for Hua to speak to Mei in her L1 (Cantonese) and for her husband to use English. However, despite Hua’s efforts, at the age of two, Mei was using more English than Cantonese, and although she could understand what Hua said to her in Cantonese, she didn’t seem to like speaking it and would answer in English. Mei was using English when playing with children at the playground, and when interacting with her Australian extended family. Hua was disappointed about this, but didn’t really mind because she felt that as she was actually living in Australia, Mei needed to improve her English. She even used English with her sometimes because she felt that she might be finding it hard to speak Cantonese.

Hua and Mei then went to China for 3 months to visit family and Mei’s use of Cantonese improved drastically during the trip. When they returned, Hua was very happy to report that Mei was now ‘speaking Chinese’. However, she also reported that she herself had forgotten a lot of her English.
Suggestions for reflection points:

1. Before the trip to China, Mei was able to understand Cantonese but answered in English. Does this mean she was not bilingual? Why/why not? Does it mean she was losing her Cantonese?

2. What might the benefits and disadvantages of a trip to China be for the whole family and their family language use?

3. The trip to China was of benefit to Mei’s bilingual development, but Hua reported a negative impact on her own English skills. What might she have done while in China to prevent this? How might her husband help her regain her English skills and develop them even further now that she is back in Australia?
3. Lourdes (CSWE III)

This story highlights the impact that parents’ beliefs about language can have on their language choices and the importance of agreeing on a plan for family language use.

Lourdes, who is originally from the Philippines, lives with her British-born Australian husband, their two children, aged 6 months and 5 years, and her husband’s 26 year old son from a previous marriage. She speaks Tagalog, which she describes as the national language of the Philippines, and her local language, Visayan. Lourdes’ husband does not speak either of her languages so they use English at home. Her husband does not encourage Lourdes to use her languages with their children and used to tell his daughter not to talk ‘this rubbish second language’ when she tried to speak it. Their daughter now does not understand Lourdes when she talks to her family and friends on Skype or on the phone, and Lourdes thinks she is not interested in learning Tagalog or Visayan anymore.

While Lourdes would like her children to know her languages, she also agrees with her husband that her languages are not very useful for her children since they now live in Australia where English is the main language and where Tagalog and Visayan do not carry much currency. It seems that for Lourdes, it is not a major priority that her children will learn her languages.
Suggestions for reflection points:

1. What kind of impact do you think the language choices the family has made will have on Lourdes and her children? What longer term benefits or disadvantages can you foresee?

2. What are the possible consequences for Lourdes’ relationship with her children or her position in the family?

3. Since her five year old daughter is no longer interested in learning her language (and is about to start school, which can make things even more difficult), should Lourdes try to encourage her to learn Tagalog or Visayan? Explain your answer.

4. How could Lourdes encourage her if she wanted to?

5. Lourdes thinks her languages are not very useful for her children to learn because they live in Australia. What practical benefits do you think can be gained from learning lesser-used languages?

6. If Lourdes does decide to use her languages with her daughter, do you think this will affect her own English learning? What can she do to make sure it doesn’t?
4. Jeannie (CSWE III)

This story highlights some of the issues that AMEP clients might face when different family members are from different language backgrounds.

Jeannie came to Australia from China with her 9 year old son, Jian, to marry her husband, a long-term French migrant who had been living in Australia for over 30 years. Jeannie did not speak French and her husband did not speak Mandarin, so although Jeannie had very little English when she arrived, they had no other choice but to communicate in English. She also made the decision at this early stage to speak English with her son where possible in order to help them both learn it more quickly. They soon started communicating in English rather than Mandarin. Jeannie’s English was also extended through her work in her husband’s small business where she had contact with English speaking customers.

However, Jeannie feels that Jian’s Mandarin has gradually become weaker over the years, and was shocked that he was unable to understand what people were saying to him when they visited Beijing some time ago. His Mandarin improved a little when his Chinese grandparents visited 3 years ago, but once they left, Jeannie continued speaking English with him. He is now 14 years old and Jeannie is worried that he will lose his Mandarin altogether. In the last 6 months Jeannie has tried to remember to speak Mandarin with her son, but she often forgets. She has also arranged for him to attend Chinese school at the weekend, but he is not very happy about this. Jian is now settled here, calls himself an Australian and says he would find it very difficult to live in China, so Jeannie feels that she must also stay in Australia with him.
Suggestions for reflection points:

1. Do you think Jeannie made the right decision to speak English to her son? Her decision seems to have some positives and negatives. What are they?

2. What else might Jeannie do to encourage her son’s further bilingual development? Do you think this will affect Jeannie’s own English language development?

3. It seems that the grandparents’ visit had a positive effect on Jian’s Mandarin. What does this suggest for strategies that Jeannie might use to encourage him to use Mandarin?
5. Charles (CSWE III)

This story highlights some of the issues faced by AMEP clients who want to practice their English at home, but all family members speak the family language.

Charles, his wife and his 10 year old step-daughter are all from Colombia and they use Spanish at home. Charles is a furniture designer and sold his business in Colombia to move to Australia to be with his wife and her family.

In Australia, he attended AMEP English classes while his wife went to work. Because he believed that speaking was his greatest problem, he decided that he and his wife should speak English for one hour every day in order to practise speaking English more. However, this plan did not work for them after all because they were both very busy with work and study and did not actually spend an hour a day together where they could have used English.

Suggestions for reflection points:

1. Do you think assigning a certain amount of time per day or week to speak English at home is a good and workable strategy? Why/why not?

2. What other strategies could Charles have tried to improve and practise his spoken English?
6. Peter (Pre-CSWE)

This example highlights some of the particular issues faced by large families in which different generations live together.

Peter is from Sudan, but he lived in Uganda for 10 years before coming to Australia and still has two adult children living there. Peter moved to Australia with his second wife to support his adult daughter who had come here with her husband, but who was left alone with three small children when her marriage ended. This means that there are now three generations living in the home: Peter, his wife and their teenage daughter, his adult daughter and her three children and another grandson who has lived with him since he was very little. Peter speaks Bari and Arabic as well as Swahili and some other Sudanese languages. He is very involved in the Bari Sudanese community.

Peter originally decided that everyone should speak English in the house from Monday to Friday, and Bari and Arabic at the weekend. However, he had difficulty enforcing this regime and they have ended up speaking a mix of English, Bari and Arabic most of the time. The children want to speak English all the time, Peter speaks a mix of languages and his wife speaks mainly Bari. Peter likes speaking English with the children because it helps him develop his own English skills. Despite his original plan to speak English at home during the week at home, Peter reported that Bari makes up approximately 70% of his overall language use, Arabic and other languages 10%, and English only about 20%.
Suggestions for reflection points:

1. What do you think about Peter’s plan to speak English during the week and Bari and Arabic at the weekend? Do you think assigning different languages to certain days of the week is a useful and workable strategy? Why? Why not?

2. Is there a problem if the family uses a mix of languages most of the time?

3. The children prefer to use English, but does this mean they are not bilingual? What are the positives and negatives for both the parents and children in this situation?

4. What other strategies could Peter have tried to improve and practise his spoken English?
Chapter 8

Stories of AMEP client experiences for the classroom

In this chapter we provide the same stories discussed in Chapter 7, but here they are in a form that teachers can use in the classroom to raise awareness and stimulate discussion with AMEP clients. As noted in the previous chapter, these stories come from accounts given to us by the participants in both phases of the longitudinal research project funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

How AMEP teachers and counsellors might use these stories:

- The stories are provided on separate pages so they can be photocopied for use in the classroom.

- A summary of the issues raised in each of the stories is provided at the beginning of the chapter, so that stories relevant to particular groups of students can be selected.

- Each story is followed by some ideas for reflection and discussion. However, teachers might be aware of other relevant areas for discussion related to a particular class.

- The stories and ideas for reflection and discussion are suitable for use in CSWE III classes, but can easily be adapted for use in lower level classes.
1. Li Ming (CSWE I)

Li Ming and her husband are both from China. They have a 24 year old son (Cheng) and an 11 year old daughter (Jia). At home they all speak Chinese, but the children sometimes speak English to each other. Li Ming’s husband, son and daughter can also speak English very well, but Li Ming still does not speak it very well. She works mostly with Chinese people and has Chinese friends so she does not get the chance to speak English to many people.

To think about and discuss:

1. Li Ming has helped her children to become bilingual. She has used Chinese with them at home so they can now speak both Chinese and English. But how will Li Ming improve her English?

2. What might happen when Li Ming’s daughter becomes a teenager and has English speaking friends? Do you think she will still want to speak Chinese at home? Why/Why not?
2. Hua (CSWE I)

Hua is from China and is married to an Australian. They have a 2½ year old daughter called Mei. Hua speaks Chinese to Mei and her husband speaks English. When Mei was 2 years old she could understand Chinese but didn’t like speaking it, so she spoke mainly English. Then Hua took Mei to China for 3 months to visit family there and after this trip Mei liked speaking Chinese.

To think about and discuss:

1. Before the trip to China, Mei was able to understand Chinese but did not like speaking it. Do you think she was bilingual? Why/why not?

2. How would the trip to China help Mei learn to speak Chinese? How do you think it might affect her English?

3. How do you think the trip to China will affect Hua’s English language learning? What might she do while she’s there to make sure she does not forget her English?
3. Lourdes (CSWE III)

Lourdes is from the Philippines and lives with her Australian husband, their two young children and her husband’s 26 year old son. They all speak English at home. Lourdes’ husband does not like it when she speaks her languages (Tagalog and Visayan) with their young children and once told their daughter not to talk “this rubbish second language”. Lourdes would like her children to know her languages but she doesn’t think they would be very useful in Australia. Her daughter, who is now 5 years old, is not interested in learning them.

To think about and discuss:

1. Lourdes’ husband does not know or like the languages that she speaks. How might this affect her and her children?

2. Lourdes thinks her languages are not very useful for her children to learn because they live in Australia. Do you agree? Say why/why not.

3. Lourdes’ 5 year old daughter is not interested in learning her languages at this point. How could she encourage her daughter to be interested and to learn her languages?

4. If Lourdes does decide to use her languages with her daughter, do you think this will affect her own English learning? What can she do to make sure it doesn’t?
4. Jeannie (CSWE III)

Jeannie is from China and came to Australia with her 9 year old son to marry her husband. He is from France but has been living in Australia for over 30 years. When she came to Australia, Jeannie did not speak French and her husband did not speak Chinese, so they had to speak English at home. She did not speak Chinese to her son because she wanted him to learn English quickly, and also wanted to learn English herself. She is now worried that her son will lose his Chinese. He doesn’t use Chinese much at all and when they visited China a while ago he had trouble understanding relatives and friends. It improved when his grandparents visited 3 years ago, but when they left, he only used English again. He is now 14 years old and Jeannie tries to remember to speak Chinese with him, but often forgets. She now takes him to Chinese school at the weekend, but he is not very happy about this.

To think about and discuss:

1. Do you think Jeannie was right to speak only English to her son? Say why you think this. What was good or bad about her decision?

2. How can Jeannie encourage her son to use more Chinese? Do you think it is useful for him to go to weekend Chinese school?
5. Charles (CSWE III)

Charles, his wife and his 10 year old step-daughter are all from Colombia and they use Spanish at home. Charles wants to improve his English and to practise speaking. He decided that he and his wife should speak English for one hour every day. But this didn’t work because they were very busy and didn’t have the time.

To think about and discuss:

1. Do you think you could practise English with your partner for some time every day? Would this help you improve your English? Why/why not?

2. What other things could Charles do to try to improve and practise his spoken English?
6. Peter (Pre-CSWE)

*Peter is from Sudan, but he lived in Uganda for 10 years before coming to Australia where he still has two adult children. In Australia, there are three generations living in the family home: Peter, his second wife and their teenage daughter; an adult daughter from his first marriage and her three children; and another grandson, who has lived with him since he was very little. Peter speaks Bari and Arabic as well as Swahili and some other Sudanese languages. He is important in the Bari/Sudanese community.*

*Peter originally decided that everyone should speak English in the house from Monday to Friday, and Bari and Arabic at the weekend, but they usually speak a mix of English, Bari and Arabic most of the time. The children want to speak English all the time, and Peter and his wife speak a mix of languages.*

**To think about and discuss:**

1. How easy is it to speak different languages on different days of the week? Would it work in your family?

2. Is there a problem for a family to use a mix of languages most of the time?

3. If the children prefer to speak English but can understand Bari and Arabic, does this mean they are not bilingual? What do you think about this?

4. What other things could Peter and his family do to practise their spoken English?
Chapter 9
Resources for bilingual families

In this chapter we suggest resources that provide further information for AMEP teachers and counsellors, as well as AMEP clients and their families. We have divided these resources into two sections: (i) Resources to help develop English skills, and (ii) Resources to help raise children bilingually.

Resources to help develop English skills

AMEP clients who want to continue their English language learning outside class have a number of resources available to them, including free activities organised by local libraries, books and websites.

The local library

Most local libraries run language activities for children, such as ‘rhyme time’ where parents and their babies come together to sing nursery rhymes, or ‘story time’, where parents and their young children can listen to someone reading a story in English. Some libraries also run ‘bilingual story time’, where a story is told in two languages. Librarians can provide information about the language based activities on offer at a particular library. Information is also available on library websites.

The local library also has a range of resources to borrow. For example, children’s books in English that an AMEP client and their children can read together, and materials for mature English language learners, such as graded readers, grammar books and exercise books.
English learning resources

- **AMES Victoria Bookshop:** [http://www.ames.net.au/ames-bookshop](http://www.ames.net.au/ames-bookshop)
  AMES Victoria has compiled a number of resources and courses that language learners can subscribe to (for a fee) and use to learn English in their own time. These include video and audio materials, books and texts, and online videos that are updated on a regular basis. The ‘English Steps’ series, for instance, features an exercise book with a variety of language activities that is complemented by an audio CD for listening practice. For more information and to order these resources, visit the AMES Victoria bookshop online.

- **Online resources**
  There are many websites that provide exercises and activities related to different aspects of English learning free of charge. We offer a selection here:
  - Interesting things for ESL students at: [http://www.manythings.org/](http://www.manythings.org/)
  - BBC Learning English at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/)

Resources to help raise children bilingually

There is a large amount of information on how to raise children bilingually available online. Often, these are blogs from parents who write about their own experiences of passing on their language to their children and they feature links to other resources and websites. Below are listed a number of websites that focus mostly on the Australian context and are relevant and informative for AMEP clients.
Newsletters, groups and blogs

- **The Bilingual Family Newsletter**
  

  The aim of the Bilingual Family Newsletter was to support families who want to raise their children bilingually. Even though the newsletter itself is not published anymore, all newsletters (1984-2010) are still available for download. Newsletters contain information and opinion pieces on bilingualism, biculturalism and language learning in general, as well as stories of how families approach bilingualism in the family and the kind of problems they encounter.

- **Bilingual Families Perth**
  

  Bilingual Families Perth is a non-profit network for multilingual families who live in and around Perth. The group aims at providing support to families from all language backgrounds who want to raise bilingual children. They organise meetings and workshops for those who live in the area, but they also publish a newsletter and provide some other information on bilingualism free of charge on their website. There are also links to other useful websites, information on ordering books through local libraries in Western Australia (under ‘Links and Resources’) and audio recordings of migrant parents talking about their experiences raising bilingual children (under ‘Downloads’).

- **Australian Newsletter for Bilingual Families**
  

  This newsletter was published between 2003 and 2006 by Dr. Susanne Döpke, a well-known speech pathologist and bilingualism expert in Australia.

- **Multilingual Living**
  

  Multilingual Living is another personal website about raising children bilingually. The website contains many useful articles by a range of freelance writers and academics, including suggestions on how to teach children to read in the relevant language ([http://www.multilingualliving.com/category/teach-at-home/](http://www.multilingualliving.com/category/teach-at-home/)) and about problems and
issues parents have encountered and how they approached these (http://www.multilingualliving.com/category/problems/).

**Books in different languages**

- **Language Book Centre**
  This Sydney-based bookshop stocks a large variety of foreign language children books and other language resources that can be used to support learning various languages at home.

- **Foreign Language Bookstore**
  This is a Melbourne-based bookstore for foreign language books and other resources in over 100 languages.

- **Global Language**
  This is another website where parents can find bilingual books or books in their native language to help with the bilingual education of their children in the home.

- **My Language**
  This website offers visitors the opportunity to look for books in languages other than English that are available in public libraries all around Australia.

**Community language groups**

- **Playgroup Australia**
  This website allows parents to look for a language-specific playgroup in their state.
Information about Community Language Schools by States:

- **Australian Capital Territory**

- **New South Wales**

- **Northern Territory**

- **Queensland**

- **South Australia**
  School of Languages [http://www.schooloflanguages.sa.edu.au/](http://www.schooloflanguages.sa.edu.au/)

- **Tasmania**

- **Victoria**
Western Australia

Department of Education. Languages Education

http://www.det.wa.edu.au/curriculumsupport/languages/detcms/navigation/about-languages/?page=1&tab=Main (a list of community language classes can be downloaded under ‘related files’ on the right hand side)
Appendix A: Strategies for learning and using two languages
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AMEP Client</th>
<th>Partner of AMEP client</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How to teach your child your first language ...</td>
<td>How to help your partner learn English</td>
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<tr>
<td>and how to learn English at the same time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching your child your first language can be important for a harmonious family with good communication patterns. You can teach your child your language by:</td>
<td>There are a number of things a partner of a migrant can do to help them with learning English and with raising bilingual children. These include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking to your child in your first language. Consistency is important!</td>
<td>Answering your partner’s language questions as well as you can;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading stories from your home country to your child;</td>
<td>Talking to them about what they find most helpful or unhelpful (e.g. can you correct their mistakes? Can you push them to talk to others? Etc.);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialising with others who speak your first language;</td>
<td>Encouraging your partner to speak without your help (e.g. answer the phone, order in restaurant);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sending your child to language classes;</td>
<td>Learning your partner’s first language;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting family and friends from your home country to stay;</td>
<td>Supporting your partner’s use of their first language – it can help them relax and feel more at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting family and friends in your home country.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s also important to improve your English so that you are not excluded from the wider society. You can achieve this by:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking to people in the community, e.g. childcare workers, other children and their parents, shopkeepers, etc.;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading your child’s English story books – even when they are not around;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continuing to go to English classes;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signing up for other community classes that you might enjoy, e.g. sewing, wood work, etc;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Going over your AMEP materials;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Watching TV and listening to English audio recordings.</td>
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Appendix B: Frequently asked questions about raising children bilingually
Bilingualism – Frequently Asked Questions

What does it mean to be bilingual?
A bilingual is someone who is able to speak more than one language to some degree. Bilingualism may use their languages for different purposes.

What practical benefits are there to being bilingual?
Bilingual children are often more creative and more tolerant of other cultures and learning another language will be much easier for them. Bilingualism can also increase job prospects in a number of professions. AMEP clients who develop good English skills also have better job prospects in Australia.

Can only intelligent people become bilingual?
Anyone can become bilingual if they live in an environment that encourages and supports their language learning.

Is raising children with more than one language confusing for them?
No, children will not be confused – especially if they are consistent in their language use right from birth.

What are the normal stages of speech development for children?
Most children can say 10 words at the age of 1½ and make two-word or more complex sentences when they are 2½. However, children can vary greatly in their language development.

Do bilingual children develop speech later than other children?
Bilingual children may need longer because they have to learn two language systems – but the difference will usually not be great. If you are worried, you should see a specialist.

Are children disadvantaged if they go to school/pre-school without knowing any English?
Children who first encounter English when they start school are usually able to learn the language quickly and are at the same level as other children within a few months.

What language should I use with my children?
You should use a language you are comfortable with so that you can express yourself well and be a good language model – no matter what language that is.

What are the possible consequences if my children do not learn my language?
If your children do not know your language you and your family may not be able to communicate well with them, which can cause tensions within the family.

What are the possible consequences if the parents cannot speak English well?
Parents who cannot speak English well risk being excluded from many aspects of their children’s lives, such as school, their friends and Australian culture as a whole. Parents may also become over reliant on their children to help them do things, which can put unduly pressure on them.


